

# In historic election, Volkswagen workers in Tennessee vote to unionize

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People celebrate after the United Auto Workers (UAW) received enough votes to form a union at a UAW vote watch party on April 19, 2024 in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Volkswagen workers in Tennessee voted decisively to become a union shop, according to election results released Friday, marking the first

victory for organized labor at a foreign-owned auto plant in the American South.

With a solid 73 percent supporting, employees in the Chattanooga plant voted for representation by the United Auto Workers at the 13-year-old factory, according to results released by VW, a triumphant outcome for organized labor in a region in which it has long failed to make major gains.

"Volkswagen workers just made history!" said a UAW post on X, the former Twitter.

VW, which adopted a neutral position in public communications, said in a press release that the election "was administered through a democratic, secret ballot vote overseen by the National Labor Relations Board."

"Volkswagen thanks its Chattanooga workers for voting in this election," the company added.

Parties have five days to file objections, said the NLRB, adding, "the employer must now begin bargaining in [good faith](#) with the union."

## **Biden cheers**

The vote marks the latest big win for Shawn Fain, who was sworn in as UAW president in March 2023 and subsequently won significant salary hikes for members following last fall's "Stand Up Strike" at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis.

In November 2023, Fain announced an ambitious organizing campaign aimed at unionizing 13 companies with nearly 150,000 workers, with the majority of venues in southern US states like Tennessee.

Chattanooga was the first plant to qualify for an election. The next vote will take place at a Mercedes-Benz factory in Vance, Alabama from May 13-17, the NLRB announced earlier this week.

The win in Chattanooga lends further momentum to UAW efforts in Alabama and beyond. A UAW press release also cited a Toyota plant in Missouri and a Hyundai factory in Alabama as places with active campaigns.

President Joe Biden, who made a historic visit to the UAW picket line last fall, cheered the result, characterizing VW as the latest big win for organized labor, demonstrating "once again that the middle-class built America and that unions are still building and expanding the middle class for all workers."



A man holds up an iPad showing that the unionization effort succeeded after the United Auto Workers (UAW) received enough votes to form a union at a UAW vote watch party on April 19, 2024 in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

## **Challenge to Southern model**

Although the UAW has long targeted the South, it has been consistently rejected in prior elections, including two earlier unsuccessful campaigns in Chattanooga.

But labor experts said the UAW stood a better chance this time around thanks to positive momentum from Detroit strikes, which took place against a broader backdrop of [worker](#) activism in a tight US labor market.

"You see the pay, the benefits, the rights UAW members have on the job, and you see how that would change your life," said VW trainer Zachary Costello in the UAW [press release](#). "That's why we voted overwhelmingly for the union."

However, a test for the UAW at elections in Alabama and beyond will be the aggressive anti-union posture of powerful politicians in the region.

On the eve of the UAW vote, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee joined five Republican governors from other Southern states to release a statement denouncing the UAW drive as a threat to the local economy and jobs.

Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, who also signed the statement, said the governors wanted to protect the model in the Southeast, which is based on "great relationships between our employers and their employees," he

told CNBC on Friday.

"What the UAW is doing is going to destroy those types of relationship," Kemp said.

Biden slammed the statement by the governors as an ill-conceived effort to "undermine this vote" based on "false" claims.

Stephen Silvia, author of the book "The UAW's Southern Gamble," which chronicles earlier unsuccessful drives, called the win a "turning point" for organized labor with major potential implications for the South.

"The South has relied on a model by offering low wages and minimal voice to workers," Silvia said. "The workers are now realizing they got the short end of the stick and they'd like to change."

Silvia said both Chattanooga and the Mercedes plant in Alabama were targeted in earlier drives by the UAW, giving the organization a foundation for the current campaign.

The win in Tennessee raises the stakes in Alabama, Silvia said.

"There's going to be a lot more political attention, not just in Alabama in Washington," he said.

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